

Message Text

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71

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 5603

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TAGS: ELAB, PN

SUBJ: STRIKE AT U.S.- OWNED TRT TELECOMMUNICATIONS

SUMMARY: A STRIKE OF THE EMPLOYEES WORKING FOR THE TRT TELECOMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION (UNIVERSALLY KNOWN AS TROPICAL RADIO) BEGAN TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16. THE UNION, WHICH BELONGS TO THE AIFLD-SUPPORTED CONFEDERATION DE TRABAJADORES DE LA REPUBLICA DE PANAMA (CTRP), HAS LONG DEMANDED A SUBSTANTIAL PAYMENT (\$390,000) FOR BACKPAY ALLEGEDLY OWED AS A RESULT OF CHANGES IN PAY PRACTICES INTRODUCED IN 1964. END SUMMARY.

1. THE WORKERS OF TROPICAL RADIO, A UNITED FRUIT (NOW UNITED BRANDS) COMMUNICATIONS SUBSIDIARY, WENT ON STRIKE TUEAAY MORNING, OCTOBER 16. TROPICAL RADIO PROVIDES TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES IN PANAMA AND THE CANAL ZONE WITH OFFICES AT PANAMA CITY, COLON, ALMIRANTE, AND PUERTO ARMEULLES. THE CHIEF ISSUE IS ONE OF BACKPAY OF SOME \$390,000 CLAIMED TO BE OWED THE EMPLOYEES AS THE RESULT OF THE METHOD BY WHICH THE COMPANY HAS CALCULATED PAY SINCE 1964 WHEN A SHIFT TO A 40 HOUR WEEK WAS MADE. THE UNION ALSO DEMANDS PAY INCREASES AND BETTER WORKING CONDITIONS. THE UNION AND COMPANY HAVE BEEN NEGOTIATING THESE ISSUES ACTIVELY SINCE APRIL 1972 WITHOUT RESULTS AND FORMALLY PRESENTED THEIR POSITIONS TO THE MINISTRY OF LABOR IN AUGUST 1973. THE PARENT U.S. COMPANY HAS SENT OFFICERS TO PANAMA AT TIMES TO RESOLVE THE BACKPAY

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ISSUE BUT WITHOUT SUCCESS.

2. THE DISPUTE HAS BEEN COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT PERSONAL PROBLEMS OF CARLOS A. CONTRERAS, THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE UNION HAVE BEEN INJECTED INTO IT. SOME MONTHS AGO CONTRERAS SPENT A FEW DAYS IN JAIL CHARGED WITH PASSING CHECKS WITHOUT SUFFICIENT FUNDS. HE COVERED HIS ABSENCE FROM WORK WITH A DOCTOR'S CERTIFICATE. UPON DISCOVERING THE FACTS, THE COMPANY APPLIED TO THE LABOR OFFICE FOR PERMISSION TO FIRE HIM (DOUBLY DIFFICULT UNDER THE NEW LABOR CODE IN THE CASE OF A UNION OFFICIAL). UPON BEING DISMISSED BY THE COMPANY HE WOULD AUTOMATICALLY UNDER THE LAW LOSE HIS UNION POSITION. WE UNDERSTAND THAT CONTRERAS SOUGHT THE INTERVENTION OF THE G-2 OF THE GUARDIA NACIONAL TO PROTECT HIM FROM "HARASSMENT" BY A U.S. COMPANY. INSTEAD, THE G-2 CALLED MANY EMPLOYEES IN FOR QUESTIONING AND INFORMED AT LEAST ONE CTRP EXECUTIVE THAT CONTRERAS WOULD HAVE TO GO AND THAT THE GN WANTED THIS DONE WITHOUT A STRIKE. DESPITE NUMEROUS UNION MEETINGS AND PRIVATE DISCUSSIONS, SOMEHOW CONTRERAS HAS SURVIVED AND THE ISSUE OF HIS DISMISSAL HAS REMAINED DEADLOCKED. HE IS NOW LEADING THE STRIKE EFFORT AND SEEMS OUT OF IMMEDIATE DANGER OF LOSING HIS POSITION.

3. IN A STATEMENT CONTRERAS ISSUED OCTOBER 15, HE BENT OVER BACKWARDS TO AVOID A CONFRONTATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT, SAYING "WE WANT TO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT WE HAVE NO DESIRE TO CREATE PROBLEMS FOR THE GOVERNMENT..." AND CONTINUED WITH THE HIGHEST PRAISE FOR THE TORRIJOS REGIME AS "...THE ONLY GOVERNMENT IN OUR REPUBLICAN HISTORY THAT HAS BEEN PROFOUNDLY INTERESTED IN FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR THE WORKING CLASS."

4. THE UNION CLAIMS TO HAVE EXHAUSTED ALL PROCEDURAL CHANNELS UNDER THE LABOR CODE AND IS CONFIDENT THAT THE STRIKE WILL BE HELD LEGAL BY THE MINISTRY OF LABOR. FIVE OTHER UNIONS AFFILIATED WITH THE FETRACELAP COMMUNICATIONS FEDERATION HAVE ANNOUNCED FOR OCTOBER 17 A TWO-HOUR SOLIDARITY STRIKE (TWO HOURS IS THE MAXIMUM TIME ALLOWED BY THE LABOR CODE FOR SYMPATHY
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STRIKES). AT THIS TIME THERE IS NO INDICATION AS TO THE DURATION OF THE STRIKE. GENERALLY, THOUGH, PANAMANIAN STRIKES DO NOT LAST LONG, IN LARGE MEASURE BECAUSE THE WORKERS HAVE NO FINANCIAL RESOURCES WITH WHICH TO FALL BACK UPON AND VERY FEW PANAMANIAN UNIONS HAVE STRIKE FUNDS.

5. COMMENT: THE COMPANY HAS A REPUTATION FOR ITS UNBENDING ATTITUDE TOWARD LABOR-MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS.

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